

Brigade Special Troops Battalions

Part II: Synergy

By Colonel Thomas H. Magness

This is the second of a two-part discussion on the brigade special troops battalion (BSTB). The first part, "All the Way In," appeared in the July-September 2006 issue of *Engineer* and highlighted the need for full commitment to this new way of conducting maneuver support operations and the value added to the supported brigade combat team (BCT). This second article describes the specific behaviors that must be present within the BSTB in order for its diversity to be a strength and for these disparate units to fight and win as a team of teams.

The United States Army has recently formed a new combat organization within its fighting brigades—the special troops battalion. Created by joining signal, intelligence, engineer, chemical, military police, and other specialized maneuver support units under a common command, this unit's leaders face a daunting task—build a team of teams out of these diverse functions. Somehow they must combine these dissimilar units into a cohesive, fighting organization and make them better than when they operated independently. The mission—for leaders ready and willing to step up to it—is to create *synergy*.

Many Army leaders and BSTB team members continue to be challenged, however, to embrace the promise of this new organization. They are seemingly encumbered by memories of life as an independent. They cannot yet comprehend, for example, the advantage of replacing *independence* with *interdependence*. They do not know the potential greatness of the new team. They have not yet seen the value of working, fighting, and succeeding—as a synergized team of teams—together.

Successful BSTB leaders quickly realize that it takes more than a common headquarters for combat units to fight as a team. Commanders quickly recognize that T-shirts, logos, and battalion coins don't create synergy. Accomplished team builders know that much more is required. Successful mergers and acquisitions, even in the military, don't happen by themselves. Nope...that's the leader's job. This article then is a challenge to leaders to understand the concept of synergy, accept the absolute requirement for it within the ranks of the BSTB as the enabling characteristic for success, and put the appropriate energy behind measures to make it a reality.

Synergy

Synergy can be reduced to a simple mathematical equation: $1 + 1 + 1 > 3$. The whole is made greater than the sum of the parts. Leadership is the action verb (*made greater*) that enables this possibility. Synergy, like so many other products of effective leadership, is only enabled by dynamic, visionary, positive leaders. Without leadership, you'll end up with acquisitions that never quite fit together (in a business sense, think of AOL™ TimeWarner) and an organization whose parts may actually decrease the value of the sum.

Synergy – The interaction of two or more agents or forces so that their combined effect is greater than the sum of their individual effects.

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BSTB leaders are uniquely positioned and specifically trained and employed to add value to the team, to create functional, effective teams of teams. Leadership is the grease that eliminates the friction inherent in team building. It is the forcing function which ensures that the BSTB team of teams is, in fact, better than its former condition—more efficient, more productive, and a true combat multiplier for its supported BCT. But putting a group of separate companies and small units together under one roof does not guarantee synergistic success. Bigger is not better. *Better is better!* BCTs must be better served *with* the BSTB than *without* it.

Common Vision/Common Goals

Leaders must create the common purpose for which the team will fight—together. Groups, no matter how mature, must have a reason for working together that makes sense to all team members. Without common goals, organizational tendencies are to form stovepipes, build up barriers, and focus on themselves. The fact is, without the synergy that comes from working together, BSTBs are not able to deliver for their supported BCTs critical *battalion* missions such as—

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- Route reconnaissance and clearance and assured mobility operations.
- Command and control of detainee operations.
- Nonlethal effects and targeting.
- Reconstruction and essential services project management.
- Forward operating base (FOB) defense.
- Support and secure BCT command and control nodes.
- Sensitive site exploitation (SSE).

Synergy comes from teams and team members who are truly committed to team play. Note that every mission on the list above requires multiple elements of the BSTB—working together to support the BCT. BSTB leaders must forge the overarching organizational vision that describes the intended end state and the accomplishment of team goals. Leaders provide the vision of how great the team can be under these new conditions. As is always the case with “the vision thing,” leaders must believe it themselves and then share it (frequently...and with passion), first with internal customers (get your team to believe) and then with everyone else.

BIG TEAM – Little Me

Synergy is created when BSTB team members subordinate their personal and small-unit goals to those of the bigger team. They must have the belief and understanding that they are successful only if the team is successful. The old way of doing business must be replaced with a new way—better and fully integrated into the BSTB and its supported BCT.

Emphasize team goals at every opportunity. Use team rewards to highlight the benefits of working together. Reinforce behaviors that demonstrate the desired corporate mindset. The challenge for BSTB leaders is to balance the need to work as a team while still sustaining the competitiveness that drives subordinate units to do their best.

Synergy is achieved by teammates who seek ways to do their best while striving to make each other better. Streamlined processes and efficiencies are realized by team members who look outside themselves to help others. Information and lessons learned are shared. The whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

Interdependence

Synergy is only made possible by teams that replace independence with the newness of interdependence. Organizations whose members are mutually dependent on each other’s unique skills, experiences, and capabilities are more inclined to work together toward a common, higher goal. They are also less inclined to grow in size and scope versus leveraging unused capacity elsewhere in the organization.

The United States Army Corps of Engineers® serves as an example of an organization working through the implications of interdependence. In its case, current budgets no longer afforded each regional organization to create fiefdoms known

as “districts” with full functionality whose sole focus was internal—district goals and district customers. Now, regional and national centers of expertise are available to each Army Corps district, with designs for projects in one district completed by teams with unique capabilities in another. Business processes have been modified to reflect the elimination of stovepipes and local behavior. Not only does interdependence make better business sense, it produces a better product and leads to a more satisfied customer. The Army Corps is working hard to do more—and do it better—with less. That is synergy.

In the BSTB, interdependence might lead to better intelligence sharing between tactical human intelligence (HUMINT) teams (THTs) and engineer and explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) units regarding improvised explosive devices (IEDs). The signal company leverages its capabilities to facilitate THT and civil affairs (CA) team reporting. Resources are pooled to create security elements to enable the battlefield circulation of small maneuver support units such as THTs, CA, SSE, and EOD teams.

The BSTB’s ability to harness the energy of units that would normally have stayed in their own lane (signal and military intelligence) while deployed and use this to enhance the capabilities of the brigade was phenomenal. The BSTB’s overwatch allowed me to double my capabilities for routine combat functions like forward operating base (FOB) force protection, convoy escorts, and mayor’s cell responsibilities.

BCT Commander, 3d Infantry Division

BSTB leaders must grow interdependent organizations that share everything—resources, information, skills, people, and facilities. It is only in doing so that the new organization is made greater than the sum of its parts. BSTB leaders must continually “wire-brush” the entire organization to identify unused capacity and determine how it can be applied to help the team, cross-level resources and capabilities between subordinate teams to meet higher-level goals, and build bridges and bonds between mutually dependent suborganizations that will create an effect that exceeds what could be done individually.

Accountability

Synergy is only realized when the team is literally, measurably, actually made greater. The parts must function together to make a better product—faster, more efficient, more reliable, safer, with a greater degree of mission accomplishment...better. Economies of scale must be realized. The supported BCT must see a better product.

Teams do well at that which a leader measures. BSTB leaders must develop metrics for the battalion and for each subordinate organization that can be used for mutual accountability. Create an environment where subordinates are free to “look outside their cubicles” while holding each other accountable for meaningful, quantifiable advancement.

BSTB leaders have the challenge of integrating company-size organizations—each with its own unique, specialized capability—into a functional team. Synergy is realized, for example, when military police are looking across the table at intelligence specialists, questioning various performance metrics and asking how they can help them do better. This measure of accountability and interdependence did not exist in the former organization. The team of teams, to be effective, must recognize that—despite how effectively one unit may perform its battlefield function—if one fails, the unit fails. Together, the whole is so much more powerful.

Team members must be accountable to one another to ensure a better team. This is only possible when they understand each other and appreciate how they each uniquely contribute to their success and the accomplishment of team goals. Use training opportunities such as officer and noncommissioned officer professional development programs to grow teammates who understand the team of teams. Leverage peer reviews to gain perspective on subordinates who work well within the team concept. Share best practices across functional areas to make each component of the whole better than if it were operating separately. Subordinates who understand that their success is only enabled by the success of every team member will begin to think outside themselves to help, and hold others accountable.

Growth/Maturity of the BSTB

An examination of one critical BSTB mission will hopefully point to the threads that demonstrate maturity as a battalion and progress toward making “the whole greater than the sum of the parts.” A battalion assigned the mission to “conduct route reconnaissance and clearance operations” across the BCT area of operations looks at this not as a mission for its subordinate engineer and (attached) EOD companies but as a critical mission for the entire team. The following three levels demonstrate the growth and maturity of a synergistic organization:

Level 1. Focus the entire staff on a single mission. The initial steps toward synergy might begin by aligning the entire staff to focus on the accomplishment of a major team goal, such as the clearance of routes. Clearly, this is more than a single company effort and not one that can be passed from brigade to company without additional analysis (where is the value added?). The result is a synchronized *battalion* mission—and the initial signs of a maturing organization.

- S-1: Develop a casualty evacuation plan.
- S-2: Conduct detailed pattern analysis for IED “hot spots.”

- S-3: Conduct adjacent unit coordination; develop a synchronized plan.
- S-4: Resource the missions.
- S-6: Develop a communications architecture to support the mission.
- Battalion maintenance officer (BMO): Establish a regeneration station for quick turnaround of route clearance equipment.
- Battalion command sergeant major (CSM): Conduct precombat check (PCC)/precombat inspection (PCI).

Level 2. Focus the entire task force on a single mission. Further growth and maturity is seen from a task force of interdependent subordinate units, each leveraging their unique capabilities to enable mission accomplishment.

- A Company (engineer): Conduct IED reconnaissance.
- B Company (intelligence): Conduct focused HUMINT, signal intelligence (SIGINT), and imagery intelligence (IMINT) for counter-IED operations.
- C Company: Provide additional communications coverage.
- EOD Company: Conduct rapid IED response.
- Headquarters and Headquarters Company (HHC)/BSTB: Fly the Raven unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) over Tier 1 hot spots; integrate military police.
- HHC/BCT: Provide EOD security patrols; make the chemical platoon available for possible SSE missions.
- CA/psychological operations (PSYOPS): Conduct focused operations for counter-IED.

Level 3. A fully matured BSTB, with a demonstrated ability to focus the entire task force on a single mission, can similarly demonstrate value added for other assigned missions. This is clearly higher-level operations, but is without question the only way the battalion can possibly accomplish the *more* that is asked of it with the *less* with which it has been resourced. But, be sure, this is value added to the supported BCT.

- Base defense.
- Reconstruction command and control/essential services project management.
- Command and control of detainee operations.
- Training of host nation units (for example, engineer, EOD, military police).
- Military intelligence and signal operations.

A Challenge to Leaders

While jerseys do not a team make, BSTB leaders must be aware of the need to build a unique brand around their team of teams. Use cross-training and developmental assignments between organizations to foster a better understanding within subordinate units that otherwise

might not have reason to interact. Why not assign a military police E-8 as an engineer company first sergeant? Why couldn't a chemical lieutenant serve as the signal company executive officer? Build a new brand. Celebrate team accomplishments and organizational progress toward the common vision.

Synergy is only possible when everyone is involved and is forged by leaders who get 100 percent from every team member. Mergers and acquisitions almost universally come with baggage—suspicions and concerns generated by ignorance of the potential for the new team of teams. Barriers must be knocked down, stovepipes eliminated.

Leaders must model the behavior that values the contribution of every single team member. Identify excess capacity and determine how to make it available to those who are overtasked. Think of your organizational diversity as a strength. Find “outside the box” opportunities to create synergy.

Synergy is fueled by communication and crosstalk. Economies of scale and a better use of shared resources will not generally identify themselves. Leaders must constantly wire-brush the organization to bring these issues to the surface. Constant dialogue about best practices and lessons learned, coupled with teammates held accountable to one another, will drive growth across the board. The total can exceed the sum of the parts—many times over.

The leader's job is to create synergy; to add value; to make this combination of disparate units *better* than their former, independent state. If $1 + 1 + 1 = 3$, that's not synergy. That result was achievable in the organization's formerly independent state, before the creation of the BSTB. Of what value is a battalion headquarters that shows no value added? Bigger is not better. Better is better. This kind of measurable growth does not occur by itself. Nope...true synergy demands good, old-fashioned, “roll your sleeves up and make it happen” leadership.



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